

Structural Apathy, Affective Injustice, and the Ecological Crisis

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ABSTRACT

What I call *the unfelt in society* refers to different ways in which certain events or conditions fail to evoke affective responses or give rise to merely sporadic or toned-down modes of emotive concern. This is evident in public (non)responses to the ecological crisis in the Global North. I sketch an approach to the unfelt, drawing on work in phenomenology and on the situated affectivity approach. I focus on *structural apathy* as the condition of spatial, social and cognitive-affective distance from the devastation and suffering caused by capitalist modes of living. Most members of affluent societies live their lives spatially and ‘existentially’ removed from the dehumanizing living conditions of those whose exploited labor and (stolen) land enable and sustain that affluence. The resulting apathy amounts to a constitutional inability to grasp, fathom, and sympathize with the plight of those who are forced to endure those conditions. I hold that structural apathy is an underdiscussed baseline of affective injustice. Its analysis can generate insights into the conditions that make forms of affective injustice so pervasive and seemingly ‘natural’ in western modernity. While the present text broadly contributes to the debate on affective injustice, it also voices some reservations about this debate and its guiding notion.

Keywords: affect, affective injustice, apathy, emotion, frames, the imperial mode of living

1. Introduction: Feeling at a distance

“What is the higher in higher class if not the capacity to put more space, real physical space, between yourself and others?” asks the legal historian William Ian Miller (1997, p. 213) in the context of a discussion of contempt, an emotion the political function of which Miller describes as “making generally available to the low as well as to the high a strategy of indifference in the treatment of others” (Miller 1997, p. 206). Miller’s observation points to a more general point about emotions: Within the emotional life of human societies, affective operations are available that frame certain individuals or groups as distant in an experiential and an ethical sense, and therefore as less legitimate targets of person-focused emotions such as compassion, sympathy, grief, envy or indignation. At issue is not so much the social power to put actual physical space between oneself and those one is unconcerned about. Rather, at issue is a routine unconcern, a trained indifference *consequent upon* spatial and social remoteness. The distancing in question is an affective maneuver. And the ‘space’ that is

meant is not just physical space, although physical distance is often in play. What matters is *lived* space: a distance measured in modes of living, the extent to which it can be said of someone that they share another's world, or conversely, whether people inhabit altogether different worlds. Such distance in worldly circumstance is often proportionate to marked instances of conspicuous unconcern, with the effect that the plight of those far removed goes unnoticed, un-sympathized-with, unfelt. I will discuss the social production of unconcern and ethico-existential distance under the rubric *structural apathy*.

Work on such affective operations on the social plane is nothing new. In a different context, political theorist Ian Shapiro has described the phenomenon of 'empathy gulfs': the inability to empathize with those whose conditions of living are too radically distinct from one's own (Shapiro 2002; for discussion, see Hartmann 2023). Judith Butler's work on the 'frames of war', discussed with regard to the differentially allocated grievability of populations in the context of armed conflict, is also a theorization of the social production of unfeeling (Butler 2009). An earlier thematization of socially produced unconcern is Frantz Fanon's diagnosis, in *Black Skins, White Masks*, of the "affective ankylosis of the white man" (Fanon 2008, 92), a socio-somatic pathology besetting those who were partaking in and continue to benefit from the violent imposition of a political and intellectual order upon a colonized people. The ontological violence of colonialism and racial enslavement not only withholds recognition from racialized others, but subjects them to an "absolute dereliction" (Wilderson 2003, 67), a regime of dehumanization that combines physical with discursive violence. *Affective ankylosis*, a profound rigidity, a stiffening of sensibility and stunting of affective vitality, is a condition that both results from and contributes to the longstanding work of systemic racial oppression on part of the colonizers and their unfeeling descendants. Colonization and enslavement are historical processes that foster an inability to see, or be in any way moved by, the plight of those suffering from structural violence.

I draw on these and other sources to expound structural apathy as a concept for a social theory of affectivity and relate it to the discussion on affective injustice. I introduce a framework of philosophical thought on emotion that foregrounds not only the social production of affectivity, but also its less discussed flipside: The capacity of social actors to prevent, evade or tone down affective engagement, with the result that a range of putatively apt feelings fail to manifest or find expression only sporadically in a collective. Such socially engineered and sustained emotional disengagement is what I call *the unfelt in society*.

2. Affective Injustice and the unfelt

Work on affective injustice offers a welcome service to the philosophy of emotion. It has opened the field to considerations from social philosophy and critical theory, expanding its thematic horizon and critical scope (for an overview, see Gallegos 2022). Scholarship on affective injustice has brought into view processes in society that are involved in shaping collective affective responses and repertoires. What individuals feel, on this view, is beholden to these larger society-wide patterns of emotive concern and affective salience. Questions of power and justice move to the forefront of philosophical inquiry into emotions. Blatant instances of a collective's policing the emotions of certain groups, as in the case of Black anger (Cherry 2022; Srinivasan 2018), or pressures to conform to society-wide emotion norms that serve nationalist, racist or classist interests (e.g., Archer & Matheson 2022), make up just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the social production and regulation of affectivity in line with political agendas. The affective dynamics of racialized oppression are a striking case in point: when the affective orientations of marginalized groups fail to find uptake in majoritarian society, this is more than a mere misrecognition of legitimate claims – it can amount to an 'amputation' of social existence; affective injustice phases into outright oppression and even violence (see Whitney 2018, drawing on Fanon 2008).

While much previous philosophical work on the aptness of emotions to their respective occasions has focused on simple examples in order to establish basic distinctions (D'Arms & Jacobson 2000), the debate on affective injustice has given pride of place to the multi-factorial nature of real-world emotions and their complex conditions of expression and intelligibility. Societal power dynamics come in view as key factors in shaping the formation, expression and modulation of individual and collective emotions. It becomes clear that such formation and expression of responses is subject to pressures issued by societal factions and organized interests, often due to their agenda-setting powers exerted through public discourse and media representations. This makes it pertinent to combine the philosophical study of emotion with perspectives from social philosophy and also with insights from sociology, social psychology, cultural and media studies, cultural anthropology and related fields.

In this paper, I will follow this general trend but without engaging substantively with the extant scholarship on affective injustice. Instead, I will propose a different way of analyzing the social shaping of prevailing repertoires of emotion. I will introduce a perspective on what I call *the unfelt in society* in order to thematize ways in which collectives tend to produce lacunae of emotive concern, so that even blatantly concerning, eminently attendable matters may fail to evoke emotional responses of the fitting kind. The concept of the unfelt provides a broader lens for studying a collective's differential allocation of emotive concern, while postponing, for the time being, some of the thorny issues of justice and injustice in the affective realm. The guiding question, from my perspective, is not whether a collective *owes* certain forms of emotive concern to its members, or to those affected by the collective's conditions of existence. Rather, the main question is to what extent a collective's repertoire of emotion is in touch with reality at all, and what it is that prevents an encompassing openness to manifest reality. My focus is on the mechanisms, routines and conventions employed by collectives to hold a portion of reality at bay, so that its prevailing

affective outlook is selective in specific and traceable ways. The first order of business for social theorists of emotion, in this context, is to understand how collectives pull off the feat of evading blatant occasions for emotional response, how some events get de-thematized, denied, edited out from a collective's affective framing of reality. How is reality socially prepared so that a selective outlook takes on the guise of self-evident truth, issuing in a collective's *felt sense of reality*?

3. Philosophy of emotion: situated affectivity and affective framing

I want to approach the concept of the unfeeling from the vantage point of one particular school of thought in contemporary philosophy of emotion. I am talking about the 'situated affectivity' approach that has informed much recent work on the social embeddedness, embodiment and interactional character of affective comportment and affective dispositions (see Colombetti & Krueger 2015, Maiese & Hanna 2019; Slaby 2016; 2017; von Maur 2021). The base constellation from which the situatedness paradigm departs offers an evident angle on the unfeeling and on modes of unfeeling. One begins by assuming a situated subject, a concrete person in their social and material surroundings, without yet singling out any particular felt episodes. Starting from a subject's situatedness then brings in view both: manifest affective comportment *and* the wider ambiance of the agent which either elicits or fails to elicit affective responses, as well as other background conditions that play into the formation of the person's affective comportment and orientation (see Slaby 2017). As situated, an individual will be affected by, and respond emotionally to, *some* of the goings-on in their surroundings. Some matters will be current active concerns, some will be standing issues, some will rekindle emotionally tinged memories or evoke certain moods. Likewise, in many situations, affective response patterns will be activated in line with the repertoire of emotion available in the relevant social collective (see von Maur 2021). At the same time, other aspects of the

situation remain outside the ambit of emotive concern and thus fail to give rise to a noteworthy affective response. Not infrequently, this goes even for occasions that seem to merit robust affective responses according to otherwise accepted standards of appropriateness.¹

Of course, *some* selectiveness with regard to occasions for affective engagement is inevitable, on pain of overwhelming the subject. There are various forms of coping with cognitive and emotive load and dissonance, selectiveness with regard to matters of concern is clearly among these. What is crucial for the situatedness approach is that the differential allocation of emotive concern tends to follow patterns that are purposeful, contingent and capable of change. Borrowing an idiom from cultural studies, there are particular *structures of feeling* in society (Williams 1977) along with corresponding *structures of unfeeling* (Berlant 2015) that can be analyzed, and a beholdenness of individual affective dispositions to larger formations of socially engineered affectivity. Such social repertoires of emotion, while allowing for individual variation, are selective in ways that merit careful analysis.

In the philosophical debate on the intentionality of emotions within the situatedness approach, Michelle Maiese has developed a view that fits this perspective well. What Maiese calls “affective framing” (2014, 513ff.) is the idea that bodily affectivity, the felt dimension of embodied awareness of the world, is modulated to be selectively attuned to specific ranges of objects and events in the emoter’s environment. Affective framing ensures the selective uptake of reality through embodied patterns of attention and habitual sense-making. Thus, it might be assumed that the social patterns of affective salience in a collective give rise to such differential affective framings on part of individual bodily-affective routines. However, initially, Maiese’s considerations on affective framing remain at the level of individual

¹ This hints at the underdiscussed fact that usually more than merely one set of normative standards for emotional fittingness and appropriateness reasonably apply in a given case. This potential rivalry of normative frameworks makes for contentious, contestable characterizations of emotions and their putative appropriateness. See Gallegos (2022) and especially Szanto & Tietjen (forthcoming) for discussion.

emoting agents. In the following passage, she outlines the gist of her view in an information-theoretic idiom native to cognitive science:

Affective framing is a spontaneous, non-inferential, and pre-reflective way of discriminating, filtering, and selecting information that allows us to reduce the (...) clutter of information to something first-personally manageable and confer upon it specific cognitive significance. (...) Bodily feelings help to determine the cognitive focus of emotions, thereby biasing the competition for processing resources in favor of information one feels is important. (...). Such framing determines subjects' attentive focus, right down to the most fine-grained levels, and thereby fixes precisely which features of their surroundings become salient for them. (Maiese 2014, 524)

In subsequent work, especially in her collaboration with Robert Hanna on the political ramifications of situatedness approaches in the philosophy of mind, Maiese has expanded her notion of affective framing to the socio-political plane. The framing at issue is now recognized to be a matter of social patterns of meaning-making that shape individual affective response dispositions (see Maiese & Hanna 2019, 43). It is a plausible next step, not explicitly taken by Maiese and Hanna, to harness the ambiguity of the term 'frame' and consider ways in which socially installed patterns of intelligibility 'frame' certain populations as unworthy of emotive concern and as, to use Judith Butler's term, "ungrievable lives" (Butler 2009). By using the verb 'to frame' also in the sense of to trap, to set up, to manipulate, as Butler does (see 2009, 8), allows one to expand this work into a perspective on the ways in which societal forces deliberately shape affective and attentional routines in a collective.

The situatedness approach to the study of affectivity is recommendable on various grounds. It brings into view not only manifest affective states but also their social conditions of elicitation and expression, it highlights the vast background of factors against which specific modes of affective comportment usually unfold, and it presents a wider angle on subjects and their being-in-the-world, as materially and socially situated, from a synchronic and a diachronic perspective, and also with regard to power structures in society, while not

losing sight of individual embodiment and the affective intricacies of the ‘sense of self’ at the heart of subjectivity. A crucial feature of the perspective of situated affectivity is that the unfelt is in the picture from the outset and can be analyzed in tandem with manifest feelings. One can always confront both an individual person and a collective with something that is perceptually and cognitively accessible, perhaps hidden in plain sight, and that presents good reasons for affective responses according to accepted standards, yet is not responded to affectively in a fitting manner or with the appropriate intensity, persistence or consistency. The occasion in question might be evaded entirely, or give rise to sporadic, toned-down responses out of step with the actual significance of the matter at hand. It remains outside or at the fringes of prevailing affective frames. This is the unfelt in society.

4. Phenomenology of emotion: Attunement, bad faith and the work of normalization

Considerations from phenomenology can help to further flesh out the situatedness perspective with regard to the systemic production of the unfelt in society. One line of thought to this effect has been provided by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, in the sections devoted to moods. According to Heidegger, moods are ways of being differentially *attuned* to the world, constituting a felt sense of reality. The unfelt enters the picture when Heidegger states that modes of attunement disclose, for the most part, “in the manner of an evasive turning-away” (BT 136). In the context of the existential analytic developed in division one of *Being and Time*, what this evasion turns on is the existential predicament of the situated individual, that is, the condition of mortality (in part captured by Heidegger’s notion of ‘facticity’). *Dasein*’s facticity does not concern a general characteristic, but is always concrete, that is, situated individual existence here and now. What gets evaded, thereby, are always *also* many of the factual circumstances that I am confronted with on a given occasion. When attunement discloses in this evasive mode, what it closes us off from is our current situation and its

existential significance. But that does not mean that we are blind to the world. Rather, we tend to get affectively absorbed by objects, people or occasions in our surroundings, objects or occasions that have salience and emotive meaning but that do not touch on a deeper level of existential significance: “what this turning-away does is precisely to *turn thither* towards entities within-the-world by absorbing itself in them” (BT, 186).

Jean-Paul Sartre’s (1956) descriptions of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) provide a sense of how such an evasive self-rapport might unfold at the individual level. In this characteristic mode of inauthenticity, a person disavows what they are perfectly aware of, and often lives this internal splitting effortlessly, as a matter of course. Self-conscious agents are capable of managing multiple contradicting ‘versions’ of reality, sometimes switching back and forth between versions in order to reduce tensions or avoid practical difficulties. But despite its often inconspicuous, low-intensity manifestations, *mauvaise foi* might also unfold as a drama of self-division: beneath the surface of conscious life, internal theatrics of a split self might play out. In Sartre’s case, the self oscillates between acceptance or denial of its own facticity and acceptance or denial of its transcendence or freedom. But it is not far-fetched to reconceive the predicament of the inauthentic self to a situation of being torn between rivaling ethico-existential frameworks, for instance, between adherence to a status quo of an unsustainable economic system, and a perspective on the necessity and feasibility of radical transformation of life in order to safeguard a livable future. What can seem like a routine, numb and effortless denial is apt to explode at any time into a drama of effortful self-deceit, when insights into the real conditions of the present require forceful suppression. Knowing and not knowing, feeling and unfeeling wrestle for dominance in the theater of self-

awareness, indicating a tension-riddled coexistence of differently attuned, differently acting ‘partial selves’, each tethered to a different ethico-existential outlook.²

On Heidegger’s version of this drama of disavowal, affective evasion is often not an absence of emotive concern but an *ersatz* affective engagement with some entities or goings-on in the emoter’s vicinity. Instead of disclosing their situation lucidly, and facing up to contradictions between existential possibilities, individuals are prone to ‘procrastinate’ existentially, working themselves up about isolated matters while ignoring the deeper facts about their predicament. This may include recourse to rationalizations that present the ersatz matter as worthy of attention and concern. And at this very point where the individual succumbs to the pull away from the hard-to-bear factuality of their situated existence, social patterns of public concern and their spurious rationales find an entrance for hijacking attention, understanding and emotion. This is how the averageness of the ‘one’ (*das Man*) takes over. Set pieces of public discourse stand ready to direct the course of someone’s default engagement with the world and themselves. *Mauvaise foi* is thereby externally propped, endowed with stock phrases, standard doings and petty rationalizations (see BT, 127). Heidegger does not focus much on the reflexivity of the self in the thrall of public averageness, presenting it as mostly passive and unthinking. But it is clear from context that Heidegger’s “subject of everydayness” is a meticulous rationalizer, skilled at finding and presenting reasons for whatever engagement that prevents a responsible reckoning with the situation at hand.

One need not adopt the framework of *Being and Time* in order to take seriously the near constant work of normalization that goes on in human collectives, the laborious production of averageness through all sorts of small calibrations and mutual adjustments of

² Nikolaj Schultz’ essay *Land Sickness* is an autofictional account of such a conflicted self, trying to face up to climate devastation and one’s own culpable involvement in its causes. Schultz likewise refers to this as a contemporary manifestation of *bad faith* (see Schultz 2023, 16).

everyday comportment, attention, judgment, and talk within the practices and interactions that make up social life (see Norgaard 2011). Far from being an individual affair, human affectivity is steeped in conventionality, which is nothing static but an ever-moving tangle of interactions, rife with praise and blame, sanctions and reinforcements, with countless little quibbles, nudges and tacit agreements. This constant collective work of default normalization is a powerful shaper of affectivity. Over time, certain occasions in social life crystallize as presumably meriting specific emotional responses with such and such outward manifestations, such and such levels of appropriate intensity, reflected upon and talked about by way of standard phrases, terms and designations. At the same time and by the same means, the social production of normalized affect likewise ensures the collective evasion or downplaying of other potential occasions for affective engagement. Hot spots as well as lacunae of emotive concern get publicly instituted. A lot will fall through the cracks of such collectively assembled and lived grids of affectivity.

This theme – the societal work of response calibration that produces and entrenches standards of normalcy – marks the meeting ground of philosophy of emotion and social theory. The phenomenological notion of an individual's felt sense of reality gets transposed to the level of social practice and interaction, constituting a collective's selective attunement to the world. It also comes in view as a product of collective efforts and outcome of a near constant struggle, which sometimes erupts openly, about the determination and assessment of reality. Such a socially instituted felt sense of reality, a collective structure of feeling, is a *collective work* (see Norgaard 2011). It is as complex, as dynamic, but perhaps less fragile than individual affective dispositions or temperaments. And it might evade critical scrutiny easier than strictly individual affective orientations, as its results present the 'natural feel of things' in a collective. Adding to this routine inconspicuousness of normalized affect is the fact that such affect often inheres material practices connected to, for instance, work, mobility or leisure in everyday life. Mundane affect is part and parcel of daily acts such as driving

one's car, shopping for mass-produced clothes or eating meat: the warp and weft of modern life in consumer societies (see Brand & Wissen 2020 and section 6 below).

This helps explain why the stakes are so high when it comes to attempts to change that status quo. Challenges of a collective's framing of reality are likely to give rise to serious resistance, because they question cherished, identity-constituting ways of life and also because they might impinge on profit margins and bottom lines. Such resistance has long been evident in the widespread effort, on part of the fossil fuel industry and its stakeholders, to prevent or constrain initiatives that could mitigate the climate crisis by curbing the emission of greenhouse gases significantly (Norgaard 2011; Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021). Part of that longstanding endeavor of obstructing climate action is the discursive mitigation of public awareness and emotive concern (Oreskes & Conway 2010), the lowering of the temperature of the debates dealing with the ecological consequences of modern modes of production and modes living, usually along with efforts to slow-walk measures of transformation. These efforts of the fuel lobby and its many allies have also hindered attempts to build imaginative bridges to the lived realities of those dwelling in zones of ecosocial devastation. The collective gaze of societies in the global north remains fixed on the proximate realities, pleasures as well as stresses, of affluent, commodity- and resource-intensive ways of life. The alarming scenarios that climate scientists warn about thus far fail to kindle a genuine reckoning with the severity of the crisis. And when catastrophic climate-related events do happen, as is the case with recent floods, wildfires and droughts, business as usual will be rapidly restored, familiar routines resumed so that 'normal life' can go on as before. A politically aware philosophy of emotion does well to place the deliberate production of unfeeling, the shaping of an affectively installed 'paramount reality' in contemporary collectives, high on its agenda.

5. Structural Apathy

When feelings are missing, it is rarely for a lack of feeling. The unfelt, as described so far, is not the condition of being *without* emotion altogether. Rather, something remains unfelt because affective awareness is occupied somewhere else. Emotive concern with an object or state of affairs is crowded out by an emotion directed at another object that absorbs attention. Thus, the social production of unfeeling is often a matter of providing *ersatz objects* capable of capturing the attention and devotion of emoting agents. This re-channeling of affect is a staple in the repertoire of societal actors that strive to align public concern with their special interests. Instead of the escalating climate crisis itself, climate activists and their “unacceptably radical” actions are singled out as targets for public outrage. Woke culture is framed as the problem, rather than the longstanding sexual and racial oppression that a new generation of activists put on the public agenda. Instead of grappling with past guilt and trauma in the aftermath of war or genocide, efforts are made to train the sensibility of society on visions of the future, on technological progress and development, while a reckoning with a ruinous past is avoided (Mitscherlich & Mitscherlich 1967).

In light of this, ‘structural apathy’ can seem like a misnomer: are we ever truly apathetic? But even if it is true that the surface of everyday life is teeming with affect and emotion, there is *also* a notable lack of an entire range of affective engagement that would be warranted, all things considered: a profound apathy with regard to the destruction and suffering that is the flip side of the affluent and protected life that many in the global north are able to live and enjoy. Due to the distance, physical as well imaginative, from the zones of devastation and the lack of effective and popular ways of thematizing the living conditions ‘elsewhere’, a routine unconcern for the fate of those far away takes hold. What I mean is less a consciously cultivated ‘cold indifference’, in the sense of actors’ *actively* withholding their emotive engagement with obvious suffering and injustice, although this also happens, and is likewise an important dimension of the unfelt in society (see Kohpeiß 2023). Rather, structural apathy, in this most basic sense, is a matter of near-total unawareness and

ignorance. While it might manifest as a deliberate disaffection in plain view of unjust and violent living conditions, it more often appears on the surface of everyday life as an almost lighthearted unconcern.³

This condition of apathy is in part due to one's position on the map of the global present, as people here go about their lives, in many cases at least, literally and figuratively 'untouched' by the destruction, pain and suffering on the other side of the globe, while also harboring a negligible sense at best for the historical root causes of the present global order and its blatant inequalities. Affect is a matter of proximity and distance, and where distance has been created and upheld not just in terms of geographical and geopolitical location, but also in terms of mediatized awareness, public recognition, shared concern, and in the sense of a distance in terms of lifestyle, habit and day-to-day practice, then affective responses to the suffering or severely curbed life chances of others can be absent or significantly dampened. Practical and discursive operations that produce such distance in ethical and existential terms might be called 'affective distancing': Operations that manage relations, or the lack thereof, to the lives of others in a collective and differentially allocate emotive concern, attitudes of care and readiness to engage on a practical level.

Focusing on the public responses to contemporary war, Judith Butler has described a range of such operations as 'framing', focusing her account on the resulting frames: selective schemes of perceptual, sensuous and affective awareness that set and embed the norms for recognition of human lives as 'proper' and thus *grievable* lives. Such frames, often issued through media practices and public modes of presentation, organize reality for understanding, recognition and affective involvement; they establish and dispose "the sensuous parameters of reality itself" (Butler 2009, xi). Once in place, it can seem that individuals do not have to do

³ There are significant parallels between structural apathy and structural (or 'white') ignorance (Mills 2007). These will have to be explored in subsequent work. The present approach aligns in outline with Annette Martín's (2021) structuralist account of white ignorance.

much, in order to perceive, understand and feel in line with the discursive and sensuous patterns that govern collective responses to violent conflict. Through these frames' operations, individuals get conscripted into the war effort: "visually solicited and recruited into the war" (Butler 2009, xii). But this does not mean that nothing has to be done to keep the frames in place and ensure their effectiveness. In order to function, frames need to be incessantly renewed, purified, made pertinent again in order to maintain their grip on the perceptual, affective and imaginative capacities of individuals. Whatever exists outside the frame has to be suppressed or pushed aside. Contravening evidence has to be forcefully discarded; witnesses discredited; narratives deflated. Affective (un)reality requires constant preparation and maintenance.

This suggests that we deal with a spectrum between a type of near total apathy, described above as a blissful unconcern of others' fate, mostly due to distance-related ignorance, and various forms of dim, fringe or sporadic affective awareness. Such incomplete unfeeling is due to the fact that affective frames installed on the social plane are never clean, as they never entirely succeed in keeping out awareness of the violence, pain and suffering they have been set up to suppress. As Butler has argued, some residual sense for what happens is likely to remain, or prone to spring up on occasion. She speaks of an *apprehension* that remains short of full recognition (see Butler 2009, xvi; 4-8), which may manifest as an intimation of the lives that are meant to be kept outside the frame of recognition. At any moment, the excluded, ungrievable lives may in some way return to disturb the prevailing frames: "When versions of reality are excluded or jettisoned to a domain of unreality, then specters are produced that haunt the ratified version of reality, animated and de-animated traces" (2009, viii).

When such traces of the excluded appear, paramount reality's dominant status is challenged.⁴ The collective sense of stability and ontological security gets eroded, and opportunities arise for counter-hegemonic stances to make claims on the hearts and minds of people.⁵ In turn, those revenants of denied realities are likely to face vigorous resistance on part of defenders of the status quo. This can lead to an escalating spiral: Frantic demands for national allegiance, attacks on subcultures as 'terrorists' and other shoot-the-messenger patterns are likely to ensue. No longer out of public view, refugees on makeshift boats on the Mediterranean Sea will be blamed for their 'reckless choice' to embark on the passage. Climate activist will be chastised for hurting their own cause with their actions, a cause that itself will be presented, all of a sudden, as a matter of broad consensus. Other examples for such reality-twisting maneuvers on part of prevailing powers are easy to come by: A staple in this dubious repertoire is the blaming the victims of sexual violence for putative complicity or inexplicable silence in the aftermath of abuse or the invocation of a 'culture of poverty' as a reason for social inequality. The list goes on and on.

In the remainder of this text, I won't engage further with the social-diagnostic task of revealing such discursive maneuvers, although it is important to acknowledge the importance of this discursive work in society in shaping and renewing affective frames; this is one key meaning of the term 'structural' in 'structural apathy'. But from the vantage point of a comprehensive analysis, something else is of equal importance: structural apathy is instituted and held in place by everyday habits, by modes of affective, cognitive and practical alignment with affluent, resource-intensive modes of living. Such modes of living absorb attention and energy and effect a deep habituation of embodied agents. Accordingly, the focus of a study

⁴ On the notion of *paramount reality*, see Schütz (1974).

⁵ Butler places high hopes on this breaking of the frame; she states that it might "provide the conditions for breaking out of the quotidian acceptance of war and for a more generalized horror and outrage that will support and impel calls for justice" (2009, p. 11). It is noteworthy that she devotes comparatively little attention to the resistance that dominant powers are likely to mobilize in face of such infringements.

societal affect should include the material and economic infrastructure and patterns of material exchange that lock-in such habits of living. This is another key dimension that the term ‘structural’ in ‘structural apathy’ is intended to designate. It is important to understand how such apathy is produced, held in place and often made invisible in the affective modalities of the everyday, by what one might call the *affective habits of affluence*.

6. Structural Apathy and the Imperial Mode of Living

Political theorists Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen have coined the term *imperial mode of living* in order to understand “a global constellation of power and domination that is reproduced – through innumerable strategies, practices and unintended consequences – at all spatial scales: from bodies, minds, and everyday actions, through regions and nationally organized societies, to the largely invisible and consciously concealed structures that enable global interactions” (Brand & Wissen 2020, xxiii.f.). Routines and material arrangements that are integral to the lives and identities of many consumers in the global north, like individual automobility, a meat-heavy diet, high energy consumption and a never-ending throughput of resources and commodities, are connected to systemic practices and conditions such as industrial-scale resource extraction, exploitation of cheap labor and the externalization of negative environmental impacts on certain regions and communities, mostly in the Global South. The imperial mode of living, which is inextricable from the main mode of capitalist production, thus “reproduces largely destructive society-nature relations, which imply enormous transfer of biophysical material” (2020, xxiv). Structural apathy is an inbuilt feature of the imperial mode of living, a feature that is integral to the ‘mental infrastructure’ that this mode of living both cultivates and depends on (see Welzer 2011). Not only is the material and societal origin of the products that enable affluent habits of everyday life often far away in a geographical sense, but this spatial remoteness of origins is transmuted into an affective and ethical distance, with the result of a profound indifference, an unfeeling disregard of those

who are confronted on a daily basis with the social, political and environmental consequences of this global mode of production and living. This affective and ethico-existential distancing is systematically prepared by countless efforts to render the environmental and social costs of the transition from natural resource and raw material to consumer good invisible:

Many necessary everyday items are tied to a range of activities that are invisible during their purchase, consumption and use: the origin of the raw materials used in household appliances, medical devices or transport; water and energy infrastructures; the working conditions under which these materials are extracted or textiles and foods are produced; and the expenditure of energy required for these. (...) The invisibility of the social and ecological conditions is precisely what enables us to experience the buying and use of these products as a natural given. 'Food from nowhere' ... (Brand & Wissen 2020, 40)

Building upon this invisibilization of negative externalities, a range of discursive and symbolic operations render the status quo of affluent living normal, putatively legitimate, well-deserved and worthy of continued expansion. In turn, practices and habits of everyday life, normalized and taken for granted by a majority of western consumers, ensure that a profound unawareness and routinized lack of care takes hold in regular comportment.

Structural apathy becomes part of common sense, part of the consensual reproduction of societal conditions, as something that is lived, inconspicuously, from moment to moment. As Brand and Wissen remark, the imperial mode of living is "not distinct from the subjects" (2020, 42). "Indeed, it shapes subjects and their common sense, normalizes it and enables their capacity to act: as women and men, as individuals who maximize use and feel superior to others, as people striving for particular forms of the good life" (ibid.).

In terms of the analysis of affect and emotion, something that is rarely thematized moves to the forefront: the extent to which affectivity is a matter of the habits of everyday life. Instead of the rare outbursts of great intensity, what matters most are the many small and often inconspicuous inclinations, orientations, attachments, desires, bodily tendencies; all the

little joys and pleasures that juice up the everyday. Much of such everyday desire and affect goes unremarked, it is taken for granted. But taken together, these affects make up a robust formation with far-reaching effects. To a significant extent, structural apathy is the flipside of this affective formation: the inattention, the unawareness, the indifference effected by the richly textured affectivity of everyday life. The distancing and making-invisible of unsustainable resource extraction, exploitation of labor power and care capacities and ‘dirty’ production processes inherent to the imperial mode of living is thus mirrored affectively, by a structure of unfeeling that circumscribes an excluded zone beyond the ken of mundane responsiveness. Affective habits of affluence occupy the forefront of attention so that potential responses to structural violence are for the most part kept off stage. These everyday affects fill up attention, occupy headspace, especially as ideas of the good life are formulated for most people likewise in terms of the imperial mode of living. Accordingly, most people’s sense of familiarity, their embodied habits and affective styles, their pleasure-yielding routines, their horizons of aspiration – all this is inextricable from the practices of affluent living. In this manner, the imperial mode of living is literally *self*-constituting: it produces and nourishes an affective *sense of self* which forms the backbone of existential orientations, tastes and life-sustaining attachments and guides individual agency.

This affective sense of self is key to the reflexive dimension of structural apathy. As described above with reference to the concept of bad faith, there is a routine reflexivity that operates through affective habits. For the most part, this reflexivity manifests as an unthinking alignment with a characteristic bundle of material practices, choices and orientations. These are experienced as broadly pleasurable, well deserved, unproblematic, normal and familiar – affective habits present, in an evident and seamless manner, what is *natural* for me to do, to own, to use, to enjoy, to aspire to. But there is another layer to this reflexivity: Individuals are ready to either defend their way of life against challenges, and mobilize justifications for it; or they display a degree of insight into its problematic nature, but find ways to square their

continued involvement in such modes of living with the acknowledgment of their problematic and detrimental nature. This harks back to the ‘drama of disavowal’ described above.

Accordingly, we might find a formulaic avowal of guilt or bad conscience in view of consumer choices known to be deleterious, probably paired with vague pronouncements to do better in the future. Yet, to date, defensive moves are more frequent; issued in line with publicly available discursive patterns. *I work hard every day, so aren't these few little comforts well deserved? – Others' lifestyles are much worse than mine, so why bother me?! – If politicians would implement more effective measures, things could be better quickly, but individuals can do little on their own. – I'm already doing a lot, eating less meat, flying less, buying organic, so let me please indulge in some of these remaining comforts...* With such familiar-ringing tropes, we already dwell in the vicinity of the more eco-aware circles of society (which remain among the worst emitters of CO₂, given that ecological footprints consistently rise proportionate to household income). On the other side of the spectrum, we find more aggressive, unashamed defenders of the capitalist status quo. Here, the reflexivity of the affective habits of affluence might take the form of a doubling down on deleterious practices: ostentatiously driving the biggest and ‘dirtiest’ cars (Daggett 2018), installing new gas heating systems, flying and buying like there is no tomorrow.⁶ Right-wing political populists across the Western hemisphere have made this reactionary backlash against climate- and eco-aware policies and lifestyles a focal element of their agenda (see Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021). They often draw on a longstanding sense of entitlement in segments of the population that either had enjoyed historical privilege or were recruited into the fray by symbolic means that seemingly extend that privilege to them. As I will discuss further in the next section, *whiteness* as a global structure of historically accrued privilege plays a central

⁶ In her analysis of “petro-masculinity”, Cara Daggett (2018) helpfully distinguished between (passive) climate change denial and (active) climate change refusal, manifest in the doubling down on deleterious practices: “Refusal is active. Angry. It demands struggle” (2018, 41).

role (Roediger 1991; Guenther 2019; Mills 1997; von Redecker 2020). In view of the dominance of the imperial mode of living and the fact that many of its practices are currently without alternative in most affluent societies, it is understandable, if regrettable, that those who set out to defend it find a noticeable measure of resonance in society.

In terms of a theory of structural apathy, the reflexive dimension of everyday affectivity needs to be firmly in the picture. Selective unfeeling with its structural root causes is endowed with a reflexive control instance, an operative sense of self: a dynamic self-understanding affectively constituted in the form of a bundle of attachments, inclinations and tastes.⁷ This socially scaffolded mental ‘instance’, as we might call, helps to defend the prevailing affective outlook against challenges and infringements. Accordingly, everyday affectivity is at once smooth, seamless, a matter of flow and habit, *and* a complex configuration of knowledge, self-awareness and practical reflexivity, which merge to form a defensive capacity ready to fend off challenges to its prevalent outlook. This operative instance, even more so than the affective habits of affluence themselves, is an invisible social *and mental* institution, anchored at the level of public discourse and collective understanding, deposited differentially within individuals’ practical self-understanding. Propped from without, prompted into action by challenges to the status quo, and enacted through rationalizations, strong (and presumably self-vindicating) expressions of preference or aversion, the reflexive core of structural apathy presents a sophisticated subjective capacity. It deserves further scrutiny as a key mental institution of late-liberal societies.⁸

⁷ When speaking of a “sense of self” or a “practical self-understanding” I am drawing on the work of Charles Taylor (1985), who argues for the entwinement of language, emotion and practical reason in the constitution of subjectivity. Sylvia Wynter (2001) has built her genealogy of the coloniality of the modern onto-epistemological order on a related notion of an affective sense of self. On Wynter’s account, the sense of self works as a conduit for transposing socio-cultural patterns into practical self-relations. Oppressive social arrangements can thus feel evident and natural to those whose sense of self was shaped by the hegemonic cultural matrix.

⁸ The study of the mutually formative intersection of social institutions and operative mental capacities belongs to the emerging field of a ‘political philosophy of mind’ (see Protevi 2009; Slaby 2016 and Maiese & Hanna 2019). Specifically on the notion of mental institutions see Gallagher (2013).

7. Structural apathy and affective injustice

Work on affective injustice has so far focused on the manner in which the affective and emotional orientations of certain groups are broadly ignored, misread, deemed irrelevant or unintelligible on part of dominant strands of society. Affective injustice, according to key authors in this debate, is “injustice faced by people specifically in their capacity as affective beings” (Gallegos 2022, 185, see Archer & Mills 2019, 75). By contrast, the present account is mainly concerned with the way in which conditions of living, distant lifeworlds and existential situations fail to find affective uptake on part of individuals and collectives in affluent societies of the global north. The indifference and dereliction that is structural apathy pertains to more than just the emotional states of marginalized subjects – it pertains to the lives, to existence and existential conditions of those it blocks out of its frames. In view of this, one can say that the analysis offered here provides a perspective on the systemic conditions that set the stage for the more specific interactional and person-centered types of affective injustice discussed in the literature. If this is correct, then an approach to structural apathy complements and contextualizes work on affective injustice, not least by building links to work in critical social theory, political economy and political ecology.

What remains to be explored is whether there is a more substantive relation between the structures of unfeeling discussed here and instances of affective injustice in the narrower sense. To what extent are the modes of neglect and indifference that inhere the imperial mode of living connected to phenomena like affective marginalization, affective exploitation and affective violence that scholars of affective injustice have put on the agenda (Whitney 2018)?

Philosophical work on affective injustice has not yet consolidated to the point that criteria for what counts as an instance of affective injustice have been agreed-upon, nor is there consensus on the conception of justice that should inform this work. I cannot resolve these issues, and leave the task to others who have brought forth noteworthy proposals (e.g.,

Gallegos 2022). Instead, I want to briefly discuss one approach that resonates with the considerations offered here. I am speaking of Shiloh Whitney's (2018) Merleau-Ponty- and Fanon-inspired account of affective injustice in gendered and especially racialized oppression.

Whitney draws on Merleau-Ponty to not only stress the entwinement of intentionality and affective force in the dynamics of the body schema, as other phenomenological accounts have done, but also in order to emphasize the essential intersubjectivity or *intercorporeality* of affective comportment (see Fuchs 2017). According to Merleau-Ponty, a person's affectivity is not only accessible and intelligible to onlooking others, but it *depends* for its full development and expression on its being taken up in interaction, that is, in mutual corporeal attunement. How others interactively respond to my affective comportment is thus partly constitutive of the affective engagements I am capable of. Accordingly, a person's affectivity requires a sufficiently developed interactional practice as its condition of expression; affect essentially happens in the corporeal attunement *between* subjects, it is social through and through. Whitney moreover points out, moving beyond Merleau-Ponty, that the sociality of affect extends into translocal 'affective economies' (Ahmed 2004), which consist in a global circulation of affectively imbued symbols, practices and discourses that animate performative reenactment and ensure the interactional uptake of affective displays well beyond face-to-face encounters.

When affectivity depends for its full expression on its role in social interaction and its being informed by affective economies, then cases of affective disregard are more than just cases of misrecognition. They amount to an actual injury, a disabling of the others' emotive comportment, and even, as Frantz Fanon has described it, to an "amputation" of embodied existence (Fanon 2008, 85). Based on her understanding of affect, Whitney emphasizes the severity of the cases that are usually discussed as examples of affective injustice, presenting them as an escalating multi-step procedure:

[F]irst, there is a *muting or amputation of affective intentionality and reduction to “mere” affect*; and second, there is a *projection of unwanted affects onto bodies otherwise amputated from affect circulation*. (...) The first is an injustice of *marginalization*: an expulsion from participation in affect circulation that depletes affective agency, influence, or authority. The second is an injustice of *exploitation*: a systematic transfer of power and resources from one social group to another through the extraction of affective labor. (Whitney 2018, 497 – italics in original)

Whitney goes on to describe the combination of these processes as the “affective structure of oppressive *violence*” (ibid.), and the racialized body as a “disposal site” for “affective waste” (499). By this she means that when affects are denied inclusion in the prevailing interactive practice and affective economies, they are cut off from the ‘world of sense’ and turned into ‘senseless’ affective remains, bereft of intentionality, that stick to the bodies of racialized subjects. Severed from their intelligibility-conferring relations to the world, the affectivity of racialized subjects appears to the dominant white gaze as a bundle of irrational forces, dangerous impulses, atavistic remains of a savage past.⁹ “Feminized and racialized people are marked as receptacles for projecting unwanted affects, and this projection is not only an epistemic wrong of prejudicial misattribution: it is also *exploitative*, exhausting marginalized people of their affective resources with its depleting effects” (503).¹⁰

The workings of racializing affect that Whitney describes can complement the picture of structural apathy so far developed. These affects are the undertow of the imperial mode of living. The same affective formation that ‘up front’ consists of attachments to the manifestations of affluent lifestyles ‘on its backside’ excludes and disables subaltern subjects by keeping them out of mutually enabling interactional practice and affective economies.

⁹ Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) has charted the longstanding practice of construing the ‘others of Europe’ as affectable subjects (i.e., irrational, unintelligible) in oppositions to the transparent, self-reflexive subjects of enlightenment. Such an historical reassessment of philosophical conceptions of subjectivity provides an indispensable backdrop to the work of critical phenomenologists such as Al-Saji, Guenther and Whitney.

¹⁰ I cannot do justice to the rich intersectional account of affective oppression, exploitation and violence that Whitney develops, based on materials from Fanon, Frye, Lorde, Ahmed, Lugones, Brennan and others. This account is an excellent example for the appeal and productivity of current work in critical phenomenology.

Seen in this light, structural apathy not only withholds intelligibility from racialized subjects and their affective expressions, but exerts effects that amount to affective oppression and violence. While Whitney focuses on the harms caused by affective racialization, in particular on the damage done to the lived experience of racialized subjects, the perspective developed here is equally interested in the ‘other side’ of this destructive relationality: the dominative mode of affective racialization, its manifestations and enabling conditions.

Accordingly, the focus here is, to use Fanon’s words, less on the amputation of the body schema and on the forceful imposition of an “historico-racial schema”, but more on the “affective ankylosis of the white man” (Fanon 2008, 92). With this term, Fanon tries to get at the affective rigidity and mechanical coldness that in his view characterizes the racializing habits of hegemonic white subjects. Noteworthy here is not only the lack of affective plasticity and absence of fellow feelings, but also an uncaring, unthinking, unsympathetic orientation, an affective rigidity in close alignment with a calmly curated ignorance (see Mills 2007). This ignorance does not spring from intellectual deficiencies or from a lack of access to information, but from a stubborn and routinized disregard. It is the mindset of structural apathy. Fanon analyzes it in a phenomenological and psychoanalytic key and with the dissecting gaze of the forensic examiner, arriving at ‘affective ankylosis’ as an apt diagnostic expression for the condition at issue.

The account of structural apathy offered here is more general, it aims to cover a wider swath of affective orientations inherent to modern modes of living, but it converges with Fanon’s diagnosis at the point where uncaring disregard ossifies into bodily habits of a particularly intransigent kind. Over and above a mere ‘swimming with the tide’, people’s investment in the imperial mode of living, or in the expansive habits of whiteness, can take the form of a rigidified, closed-off orientation. Where this orientation has taken hold, subjects are unable to apprehend anything other than what is laid out in advance by the schematism of a stereotypical past (see Al-Saji 2014). Such ‘mechanized’ affective habits suspend ethical

awareness and the capacity to sympathize with the lives and humanity of those who look, live and act differently from the representatives of hegemonic personhood (see Ahmed 2007).

These ‘other’ lives fail to evoke ethical responses, while this failure to respond will be reflexively rationalized by recourse to very rigidity of these repulsive reactions:

Rather than engaging in the affective work of responding to those lives, repulsion blocks that response, effectively congealing the porosity and fluidity of the affective sphere. Ethical unresponsiveness to the other (...) is hence masked and justified by an affective hyper-reaction that, at once sustains racialization and blocks the difficult work of responsivity by taking its place. (Al-Saji 2014, 141)

In the terms of the present analysis, such racializing affects are modalities of unfeeling, manifestations of structural apathy: they display systematic lacunae, harbor zones of invisibility that have been installed, in the historical *longue durée*, by the social and cultural formations that these affects belong to.

In view of this, it makes sense to adopt central aspects of Whitney’s Fanon-inspired account of racializing affect into the broader theory of structural apathy. What both approaches have in common is the idea that longstanding social formations, modes of living, arrangements of practices and institutions, and their concomitant discourses and rationalizations, tend to congeal into embodied affective habits. These habits frame the members of certain populations as unworthy of attention, care, sympathy and earnest understanding. Such affective habits appear innocent in their seamless operation, are lived as natural proclivities, as the obvious responses to their presumably adequate objects, and thereby tend to provide their own rationalization. Over and above specifically racist affective patterns, structural apathy encompasses modes of entitled possessiveness with regard to resources, spaces, labor power, public services, and also others’ attention and interest. It is part of a broader existential expansiveness that externalizes its toxic downsides while it

renders its own enabling conditions invisible (see Ahmed 2007; Guenther 2019; von Redecker 2020).

8. Outlook: Looking past (affective) injustice

In view of the harm caused by these affective habits, they surely pass as cases of affective injustice. Yet I am not convinced that their designation as “unjust” adds very much to the analysis as it stands, and whether emphasis on criteria for specifically affective forms of injustice will significantly advance the debate about systemic oppression, global inequality and forms of neo-colonial social organization. In view of the historical permanence and stability of these formations, and the largely unchallenged positions of many of those responsible for maintaining them, it seems questionable to assume that appeals to justice will move the needle of political awareness and transformative initiative. For this reason, the emphasis in this text was less on developing an approach to affective injustice, although some groundwork for such an endeavor was provided. The emphasis was on grappling with the ubiquity, seeming naturalness, and inconspicuousness of affective formations and modes of living that block out of view their hazardous, oppressive and violent enabling conditions. While the unjust nature of these formations is obvious, both in terms of affect and more generally, what is often not acknowledged nor understood is their massive reach, depth and stability, their generativity in producing new forms and means, and the shield of ignorance and indifference with which this colonial order tends to protect itself.

Looking back, it can seem troubling how little attention philosophers of emotion have paid to this dimension of their subject matter, how little interest there has been in grappling with the historical weight and hidden effects of mundane affective habits. The emerging work on affective injustice has broadened the scope of philosophical inquiry into emotion to encompass this broader social, political and historical dimension. This paper was an attempt to follow up on that laudable development and to shed light on an important problem area.

More work at the intersection of philosophy of emotion and critical social theory is needed to further reconstruct and illuminate the ubiquitous, highly harmful yet so natural-seeming operations of structural apathy.

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